The Riots of '81

Jeff Rodrigues

The riots this summer took Britain by surprise. Left and Right alike are confronted with a totally new problem which will profoundly influence the course of British politics for the foreseeable future.

If you always look over your shoulder, how can you be a human being?

— Solzhenitsyn, The First Circle.

When the battle between police and black people took place in St Pauls, Bristol, last year, some warned that similar conditions existed in other cities in the country and that further disturbances could be expected. Others hoped it was a 'one-off phenomenon.

Brixton in April 1981, and the ten consecutive days of disturbances in other English cities in July 1981, have confirmed the former warning. For a large number of people, therefore, the riots of 1981 will have added a new dimension to their political memories.

The perception of the riots has to a significant extent been influenced by the national press and media, and although the media coverage of the riots has included their essential components, the coverage is such that it has inhibited a sympathetic understanding of the riots and the conditions in which they occurred. Indeed, this perception varied with geographical and with social distance, and it is a particular problem for the Left that it is difficult for the white working-class, both within and outside the inner city areas, to relate positively to what happened in Brixton, Toxteth and other cities.

This article sets out, firstly, to challenge some aspects of the media projection of the riots by situating the 1981 disturbances in a historical context.

Because the riots took place in the inner cities, are bound up with racism and involved major confrontations with the police, the article, secondly, examines these three areas — the inner city, racism and policing — as essential and continuing components of the conditions in which rioting occurred.

Finally, this article looks at some of the consequences of the riots: the conclusions are necessarily tentative, however, because of the range and complexity of the issues, and the way in which they involve multiple, inter-related elements. The conclusions are tentative also because the riots raise new questions which require further examination and discussion by the Left, and for which the Left needs to develop specific and realistic alternative policies and a new style of left wing politics. The article only offers a preliminary discussion of some of these issues.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historically, riots are a well established part of the political process, and acknowledged as such both by rulers and ruled. No social historian would have much difficulty in drafting a substantial bibliography of riots covering the period from the mid-18th century to the late 19th century. But in placing the 1981 riots in an historical continuum, from the outset one qualification about the term 'riot' itself has to be noted.

The very use of the term 'riot' is problematic: the term has become criminalised both by public order legislation and by popular usage. In fact, after the Brixton disturbances of April, the Defence Committee and community activists deliberately replaced the term 'riot' by the term 'revolt' or 'uprising', which removes the criminal context and introduces a political context.

This is an important reversal because the media and the police and government authorities, seek to introduce a political element to their assessment of the riots only when the element is seen as being conspiratorial and 'alien' to the communities in which rioting took place. The representation of rioting as a conscious expression of social and political discontent on a mass basis in the inner cities is studiously avoided by government spokespersons and the 'establishment' press.

Repression as the only policy, the conspiracy theories, the related implication that masses do not have their own political ideas and motives, the criminalisation of the riots, and the 'crowd as rabble' idea contained in the term 'mobs', are illustrated by the following headlines from the Daily Telegraph:

July 4: '80 hurt in "race riot" [Southall].
July 6: 'Police face mobs again'.
July 7: 'More police riot gear'.
July 8: 'London looting campaign — imitation riots'.
July 9: 'Mobs on rampage again. 'Thatcher plea to parents'.
July 10: 'Tougher riot laws ahead'.
July 11: 'Britain's night of anarchy'.

'Hunt for the Four Horsemen . . . Special Branch detectives are trying to identify the 'Four Horsemen' of the rioting epidemic — the four hooded men who it has been established (author's emphasis) were present at major incidents in Southall, Liverpool and Manchester'.

July 13: 'Anti-riot laws to be renewed'.
July 14: 'Army camps for rioters'.
July 15: 'Riot drill assistance from RUC'.

The characterisation of the crowd as 'rabble' or 'mob' is stereo-typical among conservative commentators, from Edmund Burke in the 18th century down to today's headlines in the Daily Telegraph. In consequence, 'the mob in question, having no ideas or honourable impulses of its own, is liable to be presented as the "passive instrument of outside agents" — "dangerous" or "foreigners" — and as being prompted by motives of loot, lucre, free drinks, bloodlust or merely the need to satisfy some lurking criminal instinct.' One recalls that televisual news items of riots record and transmit disdainful images of looters and, in particular, of the working class Liverpool mother wheeling home a fridge.

In fact, far from not having political ideas of their own, many of the 'front-line' youths involved in the Brixton riots in April referred to themselves as Marxists or revolutionaries and consciously regarded the police as a repressive part of a hostile state. The term 'Marxist'
here does not imply a considered commitment to a particular political strategy or party but nevertheless indicates some form of political consciousness, whose roots lie in the anti-imperialist and Marxist elements in the tradition of black consciousness and in left wing ideas.

The attempt to explain rioting as the effect of a (probably left wing) conspiracy is on the one hand an attempt to disguise the political and social conditions to which rioting was a response, and, on the other, it was mainly a temporary tactic: whatever, indeed, happened to the conspirators?

Another important observation is linked to Rude’s concept of ‘collective bargaining by riot’. He argues, in analysing the 18th Century riots in England, that the lack of access to political channels of expression and the absence of a means of redress of grievance resulted, at critical junctures, in a resort to the traditional riot, one function of which was to gain concessions, such as a reduction in bread prices. Without committing the error of trying to draw too close a parallel with events so distant in time, it is nevertheless valid to observe that the failure of local populations to obtain access to effective channels of political expression, particularly of black people, and the absence of a means of redress in connection with police harassment and policing policy, are characteristic of our inner cities. The April riots in Brixton and the July riots elsewhere brought to national attention the issues of major concern: policing policies and methods, unemployment (particularly among youth, and, especially, black youth), inner city decay and racial oppression. The point can be illustrated again by looking at some newspaper headlines:

July 11: ‘Fresh disturbances as Thatcher seeks to reassure Asians’. — Financial Times.
July 15: ‘Government to delay aid to riot areas until order restored’. — Financial Times.

What the headlines indicate is that at the time the disturbances took place, the riots created the circumstances in which, on the one hand, access to the highest political authorities became possible, and on the other, the major sources of discontent could be given an, albeit temporary, hearing.

THE INNER CITY

One effect of the riots has been the ‘rediscovery’ of the inner city problem by the media. Media treatment of ‘the inner city problem’, however, tends to deal with the inner city as a phenomenon without causes, without development and without a history. Whereas in fact the opposite is true, ‘the inner city problem’ being the specific consequence of a number of shortsighted and ineffective planning policies, as well as structural changes in the economy. Nor are the inner cities in a situation of stasis: serious, further deterioration is probable and could well face society with a critically disruptive situation.

What is ‘the inner city problem’? There are really two parts to the answer. The first is that structural changes in the UK economy have combined with the economic policies of successive governments to create a dislocation or fracture within a number of British cities. And the second is that social and political problems have been created by the way in which these changes have affected the human landscape of inner city areas.

In taking London as an example of a city containing inner areas in a fairly advanced state of decay, some details will differ from other inner cities of the country (including those thirteen defined as such by the Department of the Environment), but the pattern of change and effect will be similar.

The inner city population

The first and most obvious factor is the decline of manufacturing industry. Although in the 1971 Census, London showed the lowest proportion of manufacturing compared to service employment, London was still the largest manufacturing centre in the UK: in 1971 there were just over 1 million manufacturing jobs in the capital. By 1976 (the latest figures available), London had lost 8 million jobs overall, and over 300,000 jobs in manufacturing. Moreover, the decline in manufacturing in London over the last two years appears to have accelerated. Unemployment, previously lagging behind the

1 Readers may be interested in two books by George Rude: Pans and London in the 18th Century, Fontana, and The Crowd in History, 1730-1848, Lawrence & Wishart.
2 Rude, The Crowd in History.
3 Rude, Paris and London in the 18th Century, pps17-34.
4 'One fifth of the country’s jobs in government, public services, banking, insurance etc, were concentrated in London.

the Defence Committee and community activists deliberately replaced the term ‘riot’ by the term ‘revolt’ national average, began to catch up at an alarming rate in a very short space of time. And because unemployment was unevenly spread throughout the metropolis, ‘pockets’ of unemployment, like Hackney for example, have experienced a rise of over 100% in unemployment registers since May 1980.

Combined with the decline in manufacturing industry in the seventies was the effect of dispersal planning. Industries were attracted out to ‘new towns’, which developed along four corridors fanning out from London in the direction of the four motorways (themselves an essential part of the planning process). These industries took with them their skilled personnel, leaving behind the semi and unskilled workers who became part of an inner area workforce which itself became structured into a pattern of intermittent working, and subsequently with very large sections not working at all.

What happened, therefore, was that the decline in manufacturing, and the dispersal policies of the early seventies produced a pool of unemployed, unskilled people in the inner city areas. The growth of the service sector, and in particular the office ‘industries’, in the mid seventies produced work for which the type of unskilled worker available locally was unsuitable. As a consequence, employment offices were faced with the classical ‘mis-match’ problem which has become characteristic of the inner city areas. And the unemployed workers and their families, faced with a structured deterioration of their material lives, began to be caught up in the downward poverty spiral.

The most disturbing aspect of inner city decay is the problem of multi-deprivation. This would mean that the family which has unemployed members, or which has experienced intermittent employment for some years (and is therefore poor) is also likely to live in homes of a very poor standard, to have poor educational achievement in current and future school generations and to have suffered domestic disorder and violence. The one person or family could suffer from a multiplicity of deprivation. In inner city areas the incidence of multi-deprivation is alarmingly high: in the Stockwell area of Lambeth the rate is now estimated to be at least one in five families.

Local authorities

Inner city local authorities, facing a decline in rate receipts from...
business premises and a major decline in local economic activity, were in a weak financial position to maintain services for a large population. This was particularly the case with housing, which absorbs a substantial element of revenue expenditure and an even larger part of capital expenditure. GLC inter war estates, for example, suffered from a lack of repair and maintenance, became inhabited by low income families and transient residents.

All inner city boroughs in London have very large housing waiting lists, but also possess a quantity of unoccupied property which is in a poor state of repair and for which the costs of rehabilitation are enormous. In Lambeth in 1978 the cost of rehabilitation of the properties on the Brixton 'front-line' was some £30,000 a unit. With the advent of the Tories in the last two years, the administration of inner city areas has become, as Ted Knight has said, a form of crisis management. This has been the result both of Tory cuts in public expenditure and the increasing legislative controls on local authority 'autonomy'.

The restriction of funding has also meant that those local authorities with progressive policies on participation, community development and youth work are unable to expand these services at precisely the time they are most needed. One effect is that the ability of people to organise themselves in their place of living and to organise their time if unemployed is effectively reduced by lack of support.

Thatcher's contention after the riots that funding would not solve the inner city crisis disguises the fact that even Tory councillors agree that some extra funding of inner city areas is necessary. In fact funding must be one major element in any positive strategy to solve the crisis in the riot areas.

It is therefore regressive that the guidelines on formulating policy on urban aid grants, recently sent to local authorities by Michael Heseltine, further restrict the scope of local authorities to establish and decide on priorities of need in inner city areas — on the basis of their local knowledge and experience rather than the increasingly recurrent use of standard formulas by Heseltine.

The guidelines, indeed, involve a further shift in policy: for the criteria for grant aiding are now focused on those projects that contribute to the development of 'a flourishing economy' locally. This rather unrealistic concentration on economic schemes is an attempt to tie local government policy to local market forces. In fact, the guidelines give local business an enhanced role in determining local government policy by insisting on 'detailed consultation' between the local authority and the local chamber of commerce.

This remarkable act of faith in local market forces not only ignores the way in which national economic developments have penetrated and dislocated local economies. It also aims to close off a channel of political agitation in the riot areas by a policy of excluding all projects which show a 'political' interest: 'projects which show a party political bias or would involve political propaganda will not therefore be approved for grant aid'. Some projects are made 'subject to specific ministerial consideration and separate approval' and these will be 'for the present, proposals for projects run by community groups — in particular proposals for advice centres and resource centres or newspapers'. The fact of the matter is that community groups, especially the rigorous and active ones, do have a political ambiance. This is especially true of those areas that have experienced riots. Furthermore, political struggle in the community is slowly coming to be recognised by the Left (particularly the Labour Party and the Communist Party) as an increasingly important and valid area of attention, and will increasingly figure in any socialist strategy for change. The guidelines' intention to 'depoliticise' is therefore a clear attempt to shift the initiative in the community to local capital and the Right.

**IT DREAD INNAIGLAN**

Structural changes in the economy, the effects of Tory policy on the funding of 'high-spending' inner cities and the fiscal and legislative attack on the capacity of local authorities to shift resources to the inner city areas have resulted in a further and drastic deterioration in the life of the inner city populations.

The situation is extremely serious and dangerous, because what is happening is the growing isolation of the inner city populations from society and its social and political mechanisms. This isolation is not only characterised by a disaffection with traditional means of redress and political expression, but also by an inability effectively to formulate protest and opposition through self-generated local organisations. The isolation is almost completed by the difficulties hitherto experienced by the labour movement in building organised and continuous links with the inner city populations. The riots and street crime have to be considered in that context.

Spliced into every component of the inner city problem is the deep-seated practice of racism. Because at the bottom of this pile are black people, who form a substantial minority proportion of inner-city populations, and whose pattern of migration and residence into the inner city areas have most been determined by the location of manufacturing industry and ancillary services. Yet in much of the discussion around the recent disturbances, the experience of racism as an essential factor is frequently disguised, simplified or just ignored.

The vast majority of black people know that Britain is thoroughly saturated with varying forms of racism and racial chauvinism. It is experienced in housing, in employment, in education (more so for West Indians); it is experienced in the way you talk to a policeman and it is experienced in the fear and suspicion in your mind when you cross a road to avoid a group of skinheads; it is experienced from young children on a bus. It is experienced in trade unions. It is primarily and ultimately experiential, it is a relationship between you and everything around you.

It is therefore impossible to divorce the recent riots from black peoples' experience of racism. Housing, for example, forms an important backdrop to the years of racism experienced by black people. In Lambeth, prior to the election of the present leftwing administration, the worst (particularly inter war GLC) estates had a high proportion of black people, whereas on a high quality estate like
The experience on the street. And the authority on the street is the police on two other similarly good quality estates only two and nine families respectively were black. In unemployment, the most recent figures for Brixton Careers Office showed 957 young people registered as unemployed, chasing 5 registered vacancies. It is estimated that just over 50% of the registrants are black and that it is three to four times more likely to place a white rather than a black youth in employment. It is also estimated that there are as many black non-registrants as there are black registrants. And the situation is evidently compounded by the educational under-achievement by West Indian children.

The experience of racism is therefore cumulative: it is dynamic and it grows. But the more immediately intimate experience of racism is its experience on the street. And the authority on the street is the police. Policing is discussed separately in this article, but the point being made here is that the specific way in which policing policy and method is experienced by a considerable number of black people occurs within a context of racism. It is very difficult to assess racism within the police except to do so in an experiential way. The lack of accountability of the police, especially the Metropolitan Police Force, to any but themselves and the Home Secretary is a major obstacle in making a more acceptable and credible assessment. It is nevertheless widely felt among black people that in certain critical circumstances the police are racist. Subjective accounts are becoming well documented, and readers will find a rich source in the Report of the Lambeth Enquiry into Police-Community Relations. Newspaper reports of the recent riots also carried accounts of verbal abuse and physical violence, but the suspicion of conspiracy tends to inhibit their ability to convince.

HARDLINE POLICING

There now appears to be a consensus that central to an assessment of the riots is a consideration of policing. In the case of St Pauls, Bristol; Brixton, London; Toxteth, Liverpool, the revolts were sparked off by relatively minor events which occurred within the context of a long-standing inability by the respective communities to 'negotiate' methods of police procedure which could command popular acquiescence. It is clear, therefore that the police provide one thread throughout all of the disturbances.

John Alderson, the Chief Constable of Devon and Cornwall, said in a BBC Radio News item on 3 September: 'Police are not responsible for the conditions in which rioting takes place, but hardline policing can be a detonator'.

One can agree that the police are not responsible for the social and economic conditions which have been described above. And the statement correctly implies that it is the police, as the 'law and order' authority, which has to 'manage' aspects of the crisis in the inner cities. But the issue which the statement evades is that policing method and policy are themselves an essential component of 'the conditions in which rioting takes place'. To situate the police in this way necessitates an assessment of the tradition of policing in Britain, and the changes of direction which have taken place.

Recent developments in police organisation and policy threaten to reverse the trajectory which has been followed in the 150 years since the first Peelers walked the streets of London. With characteristic forthrightness Sir Robert Mark once summed up the traditional crowd control strategy of the Metropolitan Police: 'the real art of policing a free society or a democracy is to win by appearing to lose'. Their secret weapon was not water cannon, tear gas or rubber bullets, but public sympathy. To this end, for example, Metropolitan Police trained an especially comely horse — the 'Brigitte Bardot' of police horses — to collapse, feigning death, at a word of command. This was apparently guaranteed to win the support of the animal-loving British public.

This careful and calculated concern with appearances as a means of maintaining public sympathy and order goes back to the very start of modern British policing. Moreover, although they have never acted with kid gloves, there is no doubt that the British police have maintained a tradition of containing demonstrations with minimum force as compared with the experience of other countries. During the worldwide student and anti-Vietnam war marches of the 1960s, for example, when riot-helmeted police backed up by water cannon, tear gas and armour appeared in most capital cities, the famous October 27 1968 Grosvenor Square demonstration seemed to confirm the virtues of the relatively benign British approach.

The new direction

This tradition of relatively mild control as a means of legitimating the police force, guardians of the state's monopoly of the means of violence, however, has been increasingly threatened and abandoned in the last 15 years. During the 1970s the police capacity to handle public order disturbances has been both expanded and refined. Between 1972-74, while the Heath government was facing up to the implications of its defeats in the 1972 miners' strike, there was much debate about the need for a CRS-style 'third force', intermediate between police and army, to cope with demonstrations, strikes and terrorists. The police succeeded in scotching the idea, but have in effect created 'third forces' within their own organisations.

Most forces now have SPG-style units which, although performing a variety of tasks (from rescue work to saturation policing of 'high crime areas) are specially trained for riot control and have become de facto riot squads. Since 1974 there has also been a proliferation of 'police support units', comprised by ordinary uniformed patrol officers who are trained and available for rapid mobilisation to help out neighbouring forces in emergencies. In addition during the last few years training in riot control for all officers has expanded, and the police have become better equipped, with strengthened helmets and riot shields.

Since the police failure to contain the 1980 Bristol riots and their lack of success in preventing widespread damage and police injuries in Brixton in April and in the July riots, police preparations for riot-control have redoubled with Home Office support. During the riots themselves, of course, there was an evident intensification of police tactics, notably the first use of CS gas in riot control in mainland Britain and the aggressive high-speed driving of police vehicles to disperse crowds.

Response to the riots

The general response of government and police has been to call for guidelines for a simplified approach to formulating and approving inner area programmes. See Jeff Rodrigues, 'Fighting the Cuts in Lambeth', Marxism Today, May 1980.

7 Black people are about 20% of the Brixton population.


9 The riots as well as police tactics are described in some detail in State Research Bulletin, No 25, August/September 1981.
tougher repressive tactics, equipment and legal powers for the police. Eldon Griffiths, the Conservative MP who represents the Police Federation, declared in the *Daily Express*, 6 July: 'The time has come to set up specially trained squads of men with all the support of helmets, fireproof uniforms, armoured cars — yes, and even guns if necessary.' Sir David McNee, the Metropolitan Commissioner, called for a mini Riot Act to empower police to arrest anyone in a crowd who did not obey a police order to disperse. The majority of chief constables seemed to have reservations about the rapid pace of change, fearing the long term consequences for 'consensus' policing.

A deputation from the Association of Chief Police Officers met Whitelaw on 15 July and voiced anxieties about the detrimental effects on the traditional police image and policy of the introduction of too much offensive hardware.

However, despite these dissenting voices within the police force itself, the overwhelming momentum has been towards a more hardline approach to the policing of crowds and riots.

**CONCLUSIONS**

At the same time as opting for a strengthening of the repressive apparatus (which it has done in a major way), the Government's response to the crisis of public order has been twofold. First, it has made only a very limited review of local authority budgets *vis a vis* inner city areas, and certainly has not budged on the general question of the reduction of local authority expenditure. Second, it has promised Scarman type enquiries, whose function appears to be to provide some sort of *catharsis*, but to make no further material changes to the riot areas. The enquiry provided a theatre, where, in a controlled and structured situation, the action and protagonists can be examined, but with no immediate resolution of crisis. What the riots have not achieved — and this would normally be remarkable — is to get the cabinet seriously to question the direction of their strategy, and, in particular, their economic policies. The contrary may well be the case and it could be argued that one effect of the riots has been to reinforce the basic direction of Thatcherism, especially on the law and order issue, and Thatcherism's appeal in particular to sections of the white working class. Even in the areas in which rioting occurred, opinion is polarised, and there is no doubt that among some sections of the white population there is substantial support for the hardline approach to policing that is currently developing. This polarisation occurs essentially around the perceived criminalisation of riots, and specifically in the attack on private property — looting. This may well be based on a very real fear of a breakdown of public order and should cause the Left to be extremely cautious in seeing the riots simply as a form of 'peoples' action'.

The **Left**

The riots have clearly marginalised the Left. One reason may be the absence of a tradition of alternative concrete policies on the Left to deal with new situations such as those developing in the inner cities.

Another is that what is significant about the riots is that they have taken place *outside* the milieu in which the Left feels most comfortable. In other words, they have taken place in the community and not in the other main area where 'public order' has been an issue, in industrial relations, in the workplace. The labour movement's effective mobilisation in the Grunwick dispute, for example, is in sharp contrast with its total absence and virtual silence on the recent disturbances. This can only deepen the isolation of the Left and the labour movement from the inner cities and black people, whereas a tradition of labour movement demonstration of support on such issues as the Debtford fire, Southall, Toxteth, Brixton etc, would have the opposite effect. In addition, we need to accelerate the development of a newer type of trade unionist whose trade union practice constantly tackles the separation of community from workplace, and who consistently pushes her or his branch to build links with black people and the community organisations through cross-affiliations and the trades councils.

When some parts of the Left have got involved, much as the Labour Party Young Socialists or WRP, the approach has been patronising and has caused considerable irritation in the various defence committees. In the first meeting of the Brixton Defence Committee, rather than listen to the views and ideas of the black people, a call from some white left wing activists for the defeat of the Tory government, nationalisation of the banks etc, led to the exclusion of all white people from subsequent meetings. Not only was the Left marginalised, but the Left was regarded very much as the *white* Left, and in some way as alien to black people, if not as a part of the very establishment which should be the common target.

The inability of some sections of the Left to ally themselves with black people on the basis of the autonomy and validity of black peoples' organisations (however weak) and experiences is based on their assumption of a 'natural' right to lead and a 'natural' hegemony of ideas for socialist change. This very fundamental weakness leads the Left either to pontificate or to 'tail' movements, campaigns or issues that do not fall easily within their normal ambit of trade union and workplace situations; what it does not allow the Left to do is to develop a complex, instructive and critical relationship, which is precisely what is needed.

This problem is made more difficult by the lack of access of black people, and especially youth (both black and white), to the traditional political institutions of the country and of the Left. And this is compounded by the absence of continuous, durable and national political organisations: there are in fact organisations at various levels. Among West Indians there are, at one level, church organisations, domino clubs etc, which provide important and socially cohesive structures; at another there are the Standing Conferences of Caribbean and Asian people; there are also political organisations. But none, as far as I know, that command recognisable support on a widespread national basis. And the absence of these political organisations of black peoples makes more difficult the realisation of effective alliances with the Left.

We have identified the inner city as an area of serious concern. A great deal of work has to be carried out by the Left, if only because of the multiplicity of elements that compose the inner city. The danger to society and politics lies not just in possible developments within the inner city populations but perhaps more so in the attitude and politics of those outside it: the danger lies especially in its political isolation.

A brief word on the police. What the strategies of the police and their growing politicisation underlines is the need for the Left to take very much more seriously the democratisation of the police force, its greater accountability and the fostering of a more progressive police culture. This is now one of the central issues facing the labour movement. The riots were symptomatic of the crisis of the inner city areas, but were also the consequence of specific factors discussed in this article. In my view nothing has substantially changed since in favour of black peoples and the inner city communities.

My thanks are due to Tony Lane and Robert Reiner for invaluable help and assistance at all stages in the writing of this article.